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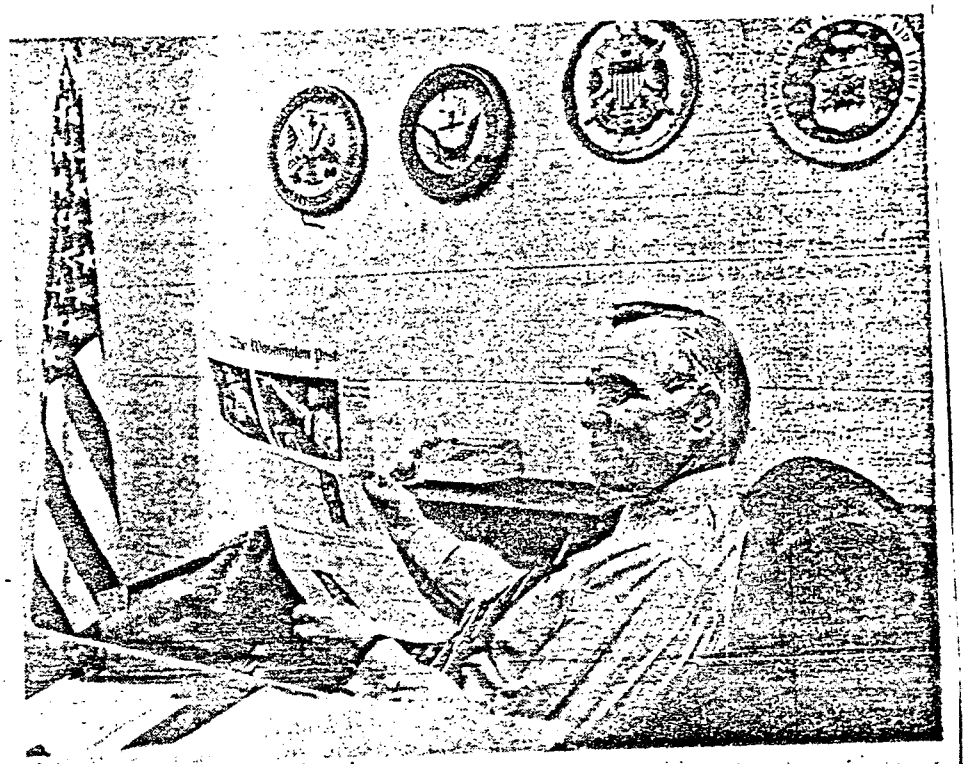

Turner has been sacking his spies

CIA

Spies out in the cold

Washington, DC

One of the most endangered species in the United States today is the spy, and the latest threat to his survival comes from the office of the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Mr Stansfield Turner. In recent weeks Mr Turner has notified 212 members of the CIA's most secretive division that their services are probably no longer necessary. Among the victims are the station chiefs at eight overseas posts. Another 225 may be dismissed next year.

In many respects, the "Halloween massacre" is a logical outgrowth of recent developments in American politics, domestic and international. The Vietnam war, the most recent source of employment opportunities for the CIA, is long over. Congressional investigations have exposed the agency's past abuses and made it one of the most unpopular institutions of government. And the White House is inhabited by Mr Jimmy Carter, who made the CIA's record a campaign theme and purports to be far more interested in publicly promoting human rights than in illicitly bringing about changes in other countries' regimes. If the administration's pronouncements—and particularly the wishes of the vice-president, Mr Walter Mondale—are to be taken seriously, the CIA might as well become primarily a research institute.

There have been cuts before, to be sure. For example, Mr James Schlesinger (now the secretary of energy) is believed to have dropped about 2,000 people from the CIA payroll during his brief service as director in 1973. But the complaints are more vocal and persistent now, because the cuts have hit the agency's elite operations branch, and because it has become more accepted, even fashionable, for the members of intelligence organisations to speak up in public.

It is also a question of style. Mr Turner, who was the president's classmate at Annapolis and remained in the navy for a long and distinguished career, has carried out the cuts like a true outsider. Many of the long-time CIA veterans on the list—men who were spies during the second world war—heard the news of their probable sacking when photocopied, two-sentence memorandums were delivered to their offices. In some instances, the technique seemed more like something practised by the dergue in Ethiopia than by the American government: the station chief in Ottawa, for example, came to Washington in October to sit on a personnel review board selecting others to be dismissed; when he returned to his post in Canada, he found that he himself had been fired.

The events have caused morale to plunge at the CIA. Graffiti have flowered on the walls at the agency's headquarters, imploring the rank-and-file, among other things, to "Beat Navy". Men trained in secretiveness and loyalty under fire have complained publicly that Mr Turner is aloof, inept and isolated in his post and that he was sent by Mr Carter to do a hatchet job. These criticisms are, in part, an indication that Mr Turner is getting on with his job.

In the midst of all this, along came Mr Frank Snepp. A longtime CIA operative himself, Mr Snepp broke his official secrecy oath by publishing a book entitled "Decent Interval", in which he details serious abuses and errors by the CIA and other American representatives in Saigon during the last days of the Vietnam war. So secretly did Mr Snepp and his publisher work on his book that he, unlike other ex-spies, pushed the entire matter into the public domain before the agency could go to court to try to stop him.